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SUBJECT: OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL: STATEMENT ON BELARUS

¶1. (U) Post is authorized to present the following statement at the December 18, 2008 Perl. Post is authorized to present the following statement at the Permanent Council in Vienna on December 18.

Begin text:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States takes note of the efforts of the government of Belarus to hold a roundtable on media freedom and to allow two independent newspapers into state distribution networks. We will monitor the situation closely for follow-on actions to bring about genuine media freedom in Belarus. We also noted that President Lukashenka has asked the government to study OSCE/ODIHR recommendations on electoral reform. We will again watch the situation closely, looking for concrete steps that improve the electoral environment in Belarus ahead of upcoming presidential elections.

Other developments, however, strike us as not at all promising. Only days after the OSCE adopted a ministerial declaration commemorating the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reaffirming our human rights commitments, Belarusian police dispersed demonstrations marking international Human Rights Day and detained dozens of activists -- including nine who were handing out copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Human rights defenders continue to be prosecuted for exercising their right of non-violent protest. On December 9, youth activist Alyaksandr Barazenska was sentenced to one year of house arrest for participating in an entrepreneurs, rally in January.

Such behavior is an outright flouting of the Government of Belarus, international commitments to respect universal human rights. Mr. Chairman, we call on the government of Belarus to honor its international obligations and commitments to respect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of its citizens, and to promote democracy in Belarus. Steps toward genuine democratic reform and respect for human rights have the possibility of significantly improving relations between the United States and Belarus. We are also concerned and disappointed that the OSCE Office in Minsk has not reported on these recent events. We urge the Office to strengthen its focus on the promotion of core OSCE values in Belarus.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

End text.

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